

Stranger Shenanigans by Iris Violetta

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Summary: When Steve's dad kicks him out of the house the day after graduation, he spends the summer living with the Byers. That is, if Hopper can survive a house full of teenagers, their friends, a dog and a stowaway kitten.

Stranger Shenanigans

The day after graduation, Steve's dad catches him kissing Jonathan Byers.

They're sitting on his bed, talking about the various grad parties from the night before and trying to decide which movie to take Nancy to later (Steve wants to see *Rambo* and Jon's vote is for *Cocoon* and they've already taken the kids to *The Goonies*). But Steve gets distracted by the curl in Jonathan's lip and soon leans forward to brush a soft kiss against it. When he pulls back his dad is standing in the doorway, face turning crimson. The boys freeze and Richard Harrington still stands there. In the pit of his stomach, Steve knows this is the worst reaction. Yelling would be okay. He knows what to do with yelling. Instead they're locked in a staring contest until his dad says, in a quiet but deadly voice, "Get out of this house." He doesn't have to say it, but Steve hears it anyway - *forever*.

His mother simply watches him walk out the door with her nose scrunched up as if she's smelled something foul. *Good riddance*, he thinks, as he tosses a stuffed duffel bag and backpack into the trunk of Jonathan's car. Jon doesn't say anything as they drive off.

Steve sleeps on the couch at the Byers' that night and while he's distracted by Will and El, Jonathan has a hushed conversation with his mother and Hopper. Steve is heading to Indiana University in the fall, but that's months away. They know there's no way Ted Wheeler is going to let the boy stay in his house. Hopper is a little harder to convince than Joyce but it doesn't take much. He knows Steve has nowhere else to go.

The next morning they invite Steve to stay with them for the summer. He laughs and rubs his head and uses all his willpower not to cry in front of them. Later, under the dark of night, he'll silently sob into Jonathan's shoulder.

A family meeting is held to discuss the change, something that is new for Steve. But there will now be six people (and one dog) living in the house and some adjustments need to be made. Eleven, still not

completely used to the concept of having a family, is obsessed with family meetings. The idea that she would be included and listened to never fails to amaze her. So when Joyce calls them to the living room for the meeting, El's eyes light up and she pulls on Steve's sleeve eagerly.

"Come on, we have to get a good seat." Steve learns that the corner of the couch is her favorite spot and is touched when she insists that he sit next to her.

After some deliberations, Karen is called, and by the end of the weekend they've swapped El's twin bed for Mike's bunk beds. Will moves into El's room and takes the bottom bunk, where he likes to burrow away in the dark. El prefers the top where she has air. For the first week Joyce has to come in every night to shush them as they giggle away. But they're the best at comforting each other after their frequent nightmares, so the arrangement works out well. Steve moves into Will's old bunk in Jonathan's room and Hopper gruffly comments that he should make sure to stay up there. Jonathan blushes but Steve waggles his eyebrows at him when the chief's back is turned.

It's not long before Hopper is no longer surprised to see Nancy's car in the drive when he gets home from work in the evenings, along with a pile of bikes in the yard. When he walks in the door there are anywhere from four to nine teenagers strung about the house.

"Why are you all here? The Wheelers have a basement! Why don't you ever go there?"

Without missing a beat Dustin answers, "But then we'd miss you."

The mornings quickly take on a routine. Max awakens at the crack of dawn and escapes her house to skate over to the Byers'. She lets herself in with the spare key, which she keeps finding no matter where they hide it, and makes coffee. She's found that ever since she started making the coffee in the mornings, Hopper no longer chastises her for "breaking in." By the time the first person is awake (usually Hopper or Jonathan), she can be found at the kitchen table, eating last night's leftovers and probably drinking milk from the

carton. Joyce and Will are generally the next ones to emerge. Joyce drops a kiss onto Max's head, who scowls but Joyce sees right through her. The adults leave for work, along with Jonathan, depending on his shift schedule at the diner. Max and Will settle in for cartoons.

Once it's past 11, Max has permission to wake the remaining two. She'll throw a pillow at Steve's head and yell, "Wake up, douchebag!" until she hears a grunt in return. Then she'll quietly enter El's room, filled with the girl's soft snores, and gently climb up to lie next to her and cuddle. She learned long ago never to wake up El too quickly. And she still teases her about the time that El addressed her as "Mike" while half-asleep (she loves to tell the story in front of Mike, who quickly turns into a tomato).

Max makes up for her early mornings by napping in the hammock every afternoon. El lies beside her, voraciously reading.

The teens all have summer jobs. Nancy is a counselor over at the day camp, which wraps up around 4pm. If Jonathan is working, she'll stop by the diner on her way home for a coffee. She always apologizes for her appearance but he thinks the windswept hair and faint salty smell of sweat and the splotches of finger paint on her arms only serve to make her cuter. Jon has been taking as many shifts as he can to save up for New York in the fall. Steve works at the movie theater, and usually brings home extra popcorn. He'll walk into the house to see the kids sprawled around the living room watching late night movies and they fight over who gets to hold the popcorn.

But the kids aren't even in high school yet. Besides the occasional lawn mowing or babysitting job, they have a lot of time on their hands. When Hopper gets annoyed with them he threatens to send them to Nancy's camp.

"But that's for babies!"

The kids are good about helping out around the house, and often cook dinner so the adults don't have to (well...more like so Joyce

can't). Jonathan and El handle cooking - she loves the idea of making things for herself, of making choices, of having the freedom to play with recipes. Jonathan helps to make sure her creations are still edible.

Steve and Will handle the dishes each night. Steve wears yellow rubber gloves and an apron, a gift from Nancy who just couldn't pass up the chance. He'll flick soap bubbles onto El's nose. When Max teases him about his gloves, he ruffles her hair with the soaking wet gloves.

At the end of July, Max and Will find a tiny orange kitten behind the shed. Her fur is soft and her face is flat and she fits perfectly in the pocket of Max's sweatshirt. Will isn't sure if his mom and Hop will go for it, and it doesn't take long for him to get El to let them hide the kitten in their room. They name her Breakfast - "it's like a code name!" - and take turns sneaking milk and table scraps from the kitchen. She curls up with Will every night as he falls asleep and then climbs up to join El before she wakes up.

Jonathan can tell that something is up - Will isn't the best at keeping secrets. Maybe a week goes by before Will walks into his room to find Jonathan and Steve sitting on his bed, Breakfast attempting to climb into Steve's hair. Max is on his heels and between begging (Will) and threatening (Max), they convince the older boys to keep their secret.

But Hopper slowly starts sniffling more and more, and one day when El forgets to close the door all the way, Breakfast tries to join the family at the dinner table. Neither adult is pleased with the surprise, but three pairs of puppy eyes eventually win them over.

(Steve's puppy eyes almost lose them the kitten.)

Steve keeps trying to slip money to Hopper and Joyce, not wanting to feel like he's taking advantage of them. They'll let him pick up the groceries sometimes but refuse any cash. He tries to help in other ways, with chores and household projects.

One day, when the house is exceptionally loud and messy, he

apologizes to Hopper in the kitchen. He's always afraid he's going to overstay his welcome. But the chief sighs and takes pity on him.

"I know I complain about all the kids and the noise in here but, truth be told, I'd take it over living in that silent trailer any day."

The end of summer creeps closer and closer and suddenly it's there - it's time for goodbyes. They have one last breakfast before Jonathan and Steve finish packing the car. Hugs and gentle punches are exchanged and everyone tries not to cry.

Max pulls on Steve's sleeve. "You'll stay with us at Christmas, right?"

Hopper wrinkles his brow. "What do you mean *us*?"

Steve simply grins. "Yeah, I'll be home for Christmas."